DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 331 318 FL 800 333

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TITLE Symbiosis, Printspeak, and Politics: Topics in the Orality and Literacy Debate.
PUB DATE 27 Mar 91
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at a seminar on Orality and Literacy (Bloomington, IN, March 27, 1991).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Interpersonal Communication; *Language Role; *Language Styles; *Literacy; *Oral Language; Political Influences; Writing for Publication; *Written Language

ABSTRACT

Orality and literacy are not antithetical, rather they exist in a complex symbiosis at the individual, family, and community levels. Such a symbiosis is inevitable and appears in all kinds of institutions, including economic, political, social, cultural, and educatonal institutions. Out of this relationship, "printspeak" has emerged. Printspeak is a form of oral speech that is highly formalized and has the character of being read aloud from a written record. The speaker of printspeak structures his argument as if for writing, and uses syntax and semantics peculiar to the written text. The logical is favored over the intuitive, and characteristics peculiar to oral language are greatly reduced. Because literacy is a social process, politics is part of the relationship between literacy and orality. Generally, the oral culture is disadvantaged relative to the literate culture. While literacy is not necessarily good in and of itself, acquisition of literacy does tend to engender creative discontent necessary for social change to occur. Therefore, literacy is a good in all circumstances, in all places, at all times. Literacy must be made universal. A nine-item bibliography is included. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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TOPICS IN THE ORALITY AND LITERACY DEBATE

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March 27, 1991

Presentation made at the seminar, Anthropology L400/L600: Orality and Literacy (offered by Dr. Janis B. Nuckolls) in the Department of Anthropology, Indiana University, during the Spring semester, 1991.

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SYMBIOSIS, PRINTSPEAK AND POLITICS:

TOPICS IN THE ORALITY AND LITERACY DEBATE

By H.S. Bhola

I will begin today by presenting two basic ideas: (1) that orality and literacy are not antithetical, but that an inevitable symbiosis between the two is emerging that is multi-dimensional in nature and scope; and (2) that this symbiosis between orality and literacy has produced a form of speech that I will call printspeak -- oral speech that is highly formalized; speech that has the character of being read aloud from a written record; in other words, printspeak sounds as if following a written script, artfully made to seem spontaneous. Having explained these two ideas -- symbiosis and printspeak --more fully, I will then briefly discuss the politics of orality versus literacy.

ORALITY AND LITERACY;
ORAL CULTURES AND LITERATE CULTURES

Oral in dictionary meanings is what is uttered by the mouth or in words, it is not written. Orality is then the state of being oral. It follows that oral cultures are cultures that communicate by oral utterances. Literacy is the state of being literate, that is, being able to read and write. Literate cultures are those that can communicate in writing. They are also called print cultures.

At the present historical time, the categories of orality and literacy do make some, if not complete, sense. They make some sense in that there are a billion human beings on this globe today who are non-literate and, therefore, confined to orality. But even the most oral -- in the Kalahari desert, on the Bolivian altiplano, and in the villages high in the Himalayas -- are being bombarded with the written word. Many of the so-called people of orality have imbibed the conventions of the written text without knowing that they have done so. Then, there are human beings who are literate but vary in their level of literacy skills. Some do no more than sign their names but call themselves literate. Some can but do not read. Some are functionally illiterate because they need more literacy than they have to function in their society. In any case, these literate people have not taken leave of orality. They have not sealed their lips and stopped talking! The categories of orality and literacy are thus greatly confounded.

The corresponding categories of 'oral cultures' and 'literate cultures' may have become quite meaningless today. In the present world of international politics, global communication and multinational commerce, there are no communities and cultures that are purely oral or for that matter fully literate. The hand and voice of the state and church has reached everywhere; and there is no institution, sacred or secular, that today is not organized on the assumptions of literacy. On the other hand, the so-called literate cultures are at the same time vibrant oral cultures as well. Thus, there are no purely oral cultures or purely literate cultures. The pervasive reality is indeed that of symbiosis between orality and literacy everywhere in the world.

THE MANY DIMENSIONS OF THE INEVITABLE SYMBIOSIS

Inevitably, the symbiosis between orality and literacy has become the rule all around the world. This symbiosis is multi-dimensional. It appears at the individual level, within families, at the community level, in the discharge of functions ranging from the emotional to functional, from the sacred to the secular (Bhola, 1990).

Individual level. As was indicated earlier, at the individual level there is the inevitable symbiosis between orality and literacy through the "code mix" in that the illiterate can not use only orality and have nothing to do at all with the surrounding environment of print -- remember there is print in the Kalahari! To the "code mix", one can add the "role mix." Where literacy has not been directly used, it has been used through mediator roles who provide literacy services of multiple kinds. The illiterate father has asked his schooled son to help with accounts. The illiterate mother has taken the letter from her soldier son to the neighbour to read. Again, the literate have not used only literacy, and otherwise sealed their lips.

Family level. At the family level the symbiosis between orality and literacy has actualized itself as the division of labor among the members of the family. The literate do what the literate can do best and the illiterate do what they must do. There are, of course, social correlates and consequences of this division of labor between the manual and the symbolic. Boys have gone to school, and girls have stayed home. Allocation of resources within the family have become differentiated between the literate and the illiterate.

Community level. At the community level, the symbiosis between orality and literacy manifests itself again in terms of the division of labor, with the inevitable social and political

correlates and consequences. The powerful acquire literacy, and use the power of literacy to accumulate knowledge capital. On the other hand, those disadvantaged by gender, caste or class, continue to be imprisoned in structures that give them no opportunity to learn to read the word and thereby to read the world.

FROM THE OTHER END: THE INSTITUTIONAL PERSPECTIVE

As was stated earlier, there is no institution today, whether secular or sacred, that is not based on the assumptions of literacy. Yet there are almost one billion illiterate in this world who have to be served; and the nearly 2.5 billion literate in the world do not want always to be communicating through print. They want to talk it over and must be listened to. A symbiosis between orality and literacy is, therefore, inevitable and it appears in all kinds of institutions -- economic institutions, political institutions, social institutions, cultural institutions, and educational institutions (Bhola, 1990).

This symbiosis works both within institutions and in relations to their publics. Institutionalization requires written rules and a dependable corporate memory. Here, writing plays an important part. On the other hand, the social architecture of all organizations requires personal interactions <u>in</u> communication, that is, oral discourse. In dealing with individuals within the client publics, institutions use a mix of the oral and the written. The illiterate are typically disadvantaged in these encounters.

Economic institutions admit a wide variety of oral behavior ranging from haggling between sellers and buyers to the bedlam in stock exchanges. Courts, as institutions of justice, use bailiffs to shout names of principals in cases before the court while they disadvantage the illiterate in relation to the justice received. Political institutions print manifestoes and party platforms, and distribute leaflets, but leaders also want to make speeches in front of crowds. Cultural institutions today use both print and speech while each incorporates the other as the folk tradition is committed to print and print is brought alive in the theatre. Finally, educational institutions are "scribal institutions" (Purves, 1990) in every sense of the term. Professors must publish or perish, yet students crave for the professor's oral speech. The lecture is alive and well.

PRINTSPEAK

Printspeak is a word suggested by "doublespeak" made

popular by George Orwell in his fictional work Nineteen Eithty-Four (Orwell, 1983). Doublespeak had double meanings so that bombs became "peacemakers", and lives are taken to save lives.

Printspeak is special. Printspeak sounds like print read aloud. In printspeak, the speaker structures the argument as if for writing, and uses the syntax and semantics peculiar to the written text. In the mix of the logical and the intuitive, the logical is favored. Redundancies, the colorful circumlocutions, the joining of words and gestures peculiar to orality are greatly reduced.

Doublespeak appears in all contexts that we have discussed above but it is most dramatically obvious in the media of radio and television which are sometimes misperceived as "oral media." Since radio and TV use the grammar of print, the illiterate get less of (or at least different from) what is intended to be communicated to them over these media.

NEITHER GOOD NOR BAD, JUST INEVITABLE

Is the emergence of printspeak, culturally speaking, as unfortunate as the reality of doublespeak that has so pervaded contemporary political life? Lovers of orality will surely regret it. But in regreting printspeak, we will also have to regret the inevitable intersection of orality and literacy, indeed we will have to regret literacy and all that literacy has made possible in our culture and technology. Cultures do produce contradictions but no one in the right mind will be willing to surrender the greater good to bury the unwanted contradiction in the total package. So far, this printspeak is more a habit of those with scribal literacy than those who are functionally literate or barely literate. We must, of course, continue to work for acceptable resolutions of the contradiction of printspeak where and when appropriate. But, perhaps, we have no option. Literate cultures may have no choice but to develop a universal printspeak different from oral speech as we know it today. After all, as Homo sapiens, we are in a perennial process of becoming.

THE POLITICS OF ORALITY AND LITERACY

In recollecting our discussion of the emerging symbiosis between orality and literacy, we can see that literacy is a social process and that politics is, and has been, implicit in the very discussion of orality and literacy (Bhola, 1988; Pattison, 1982).

The politics of orality and literacy can first be discussed at the individual level. An individual limited to

orality may be spared the "dispossession of speech" (Verne, 1976) or the "denial of narration" (Enzensberger, 1987), but orality does limit mobility -- both physical and psychic. The pre-literate is also doomed to live in the local economy, if not a subsistence economy, and is socially limited to a very narrow social territory.

On the other hand, the literate individual achieves "added potential" as he or she learns to make symbolic transformations (Langer, 1957) along a new dimension -- that of the written symbol (Bhola, 1990). The literate individual makes more effective transactions with all aspects of the environment -- social, economic and political. Even rudimentary literacy leads to a new social definition of the self by self and others. Literacy permits participation in the larger economy and, if nothing else, literacy enables voting, though it can be seen to permit solidarity, and understanding of ideology. Literacy enables the new literate, in Paulo Frerie's words to "read the world."

At the dyadic and group levels, the encounter between the literate and non-literate is by definition unequal. The literate husband and the illiterate wife, the literate money lender and the illiterate farmer, the literate agent of the government and the illiterate citizen do not portent mutuality in communication.

The politics of orality and literacy are dramatically obvious at the collective level. Predominantly, oral communities are relatively disadvantaged. Predominantly literate communities enjoy relative advantage. Indeed, the map of poverty and orality (that is, of illiteracy) are congruent. This is true internationally and intra-nationally.

Literacy is, of course, not an unalloyed good. It has its own contradictions. By itself it can not change people's social and economic lives. Psychological definitions of self and psychological empowering do not change social and political structures. Literacy may be taught by the powerful to the powerless for corrupt purposes. But we know that historically "the rudimentary literacy skills transmitted by established purveyors of working-class education [have often] acquired highly subversive potential -- regardless of the ideological setting in which these skills were originally acquired" (Lankshear and Lawler, 1987: 89-90). On the other hand, when proper literacy is taught by the well-intentioned, at the very least, it engenders that "creative discontent" with the status quo that is so necessary for any social change to come about.

Literacy is thus a good in all circumstances, in all places, at all times. One can never go wrong in making the gift of the word. Literacy must be made universal because it is an essential human skill that has been available to humanity now for almost 5,000 years, and historically has already become a Human Right. We do not want a world divided into the have's and the have-not's of literacy.

This is not to suggest that we want to declare a war against orality! People will, of course, always make oral conversations -- to emote and to instruct, to respect and to suspect, to declare love or express anger, and to swear loyalty or to threaten. But in protecting and nurturing the best in the oral traditions, we must not come out as if we are anti-literacy. Otherwise, we could be rightly accused of conservatism inherent in the existing structures and functions of our unjust world.

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